

The splattertoon invasion

The wild world of Japanese animation is now available on tape in the UK. John Renwick reports on manga mayhem

In Japan, even sober-suited businessmen can be seen reading manga — comic books — on their way home on the bullet train. Covering every imaginable subject, from sci-fi to horror to schoolboy trauma, manga are hugely popular and very big business.

It's no surprise, then, that manga productions have made their way into cinema, and thus onto UK video schedules, in the form of anime (pronounced 'animay').

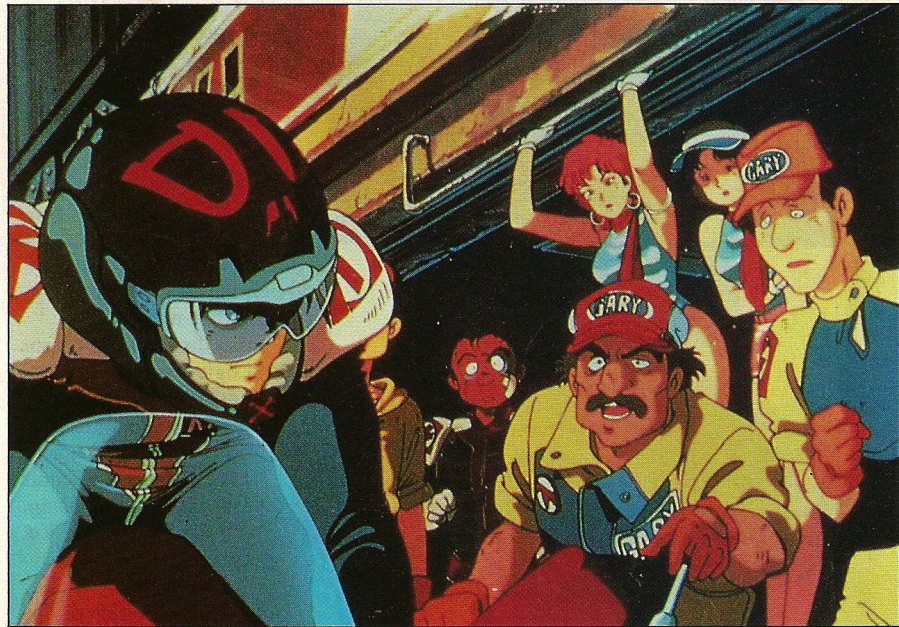
What comes as a shock is the enormous detail, sophisticated plotting and adult approach of these epic animated adventures.

As far as the UK is concerned, the first real taste of manga video came with the cinematic release of Otomo Katsuhiro's *Akira*, an epic *Blade-Runner*-style adventure dealing with psychic mutants in the neo-Tokyo of the year 2019.

Swiftly released on videotape (in both subtitled and dubbed versions), *Akira* became the first of a series of sell-through titles (at around £12.99 each) on Island World's Manga Video label — which continues to release the best Japanese material (though the dubbing clearly indicates that the series is aimed at an American market).

Ultra-violence

Certain conventions of design (exaggerated European features on the youthful characters, for instance), impose a homogenous look on the



output of many different studios and animators. But there are differences of approach which distinguish one anime release from another.

Akira, for instance, is extremely dark and brooding. It's two hours of spectacular animation showcasing the best features of the genre — cinematic tricks such as pull-focus effects, long tracking shots and fast intercutting, a chilling music score, enormous scale, and liberal helpings of ultra-violence.

It's worth getting the boxed set (IWCV 1002) for the 50-minute 'Making of...' documentary.

An even bloodier effort is the 18-rated *Fist Of The North Star*, a *Mad Max*-style post-holocaust tale which pits hero Ken against outlaw bikers and mutants. Bones snap and brains splatter in this martial arts epic, so it's certainly not for children.

Also worth chasing up for sheer novelty value is *Dominion Tank Police Acts I and II*, and sequel *DTP Acts III and IV*. Sexy cat-sisters Annapuna and Unipuma share a contempt for law and order, and the biggest weapons you've ever seen.

Up against them are the Tank Police, hi-tech cops with itchy trigger-fingers and a casual attitude to the rights of the accused. In stark contrast to *Akira* and *Fist Of The North Star*, there's lots of crude knockabout humour in these two volumes.

More thoughtful is *Venus Wars*, in which a gang of young bikers is forced to take sides in a self-destructive conflict. Fighting for limited resources on a terraformed Venus, the colonists learn that, in space, you have to co-operate or die.

For the younger members of the family, the best title so far is the exciting *Odin*, in which a starship searches through time and space for a lost civilisation of great knowledge and beauty.

Huge space battles in the tradition of *Star Wars* alternate with passages of psychedelia to compare with *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The least entertaining release so far

Akira

(Manga Video, £12.99, full-screen)

The film that created the anime cult, *Akira* is a genuine masterpiece. Taking themes and images made familiar by *Blade-Runner* into a higher gear, it's a *tour de force* of Manga animation that has to be seen to be appreciated.

It's available in both a dubbed full-screen version and a widescreen, original dialogue subtitled version.

The latter is the best bet, as the pan and scanned full-screen version is very cramped to watch and it can be difficult to make out what's going on.

Dominion Tank Police — Acts 1 and 2

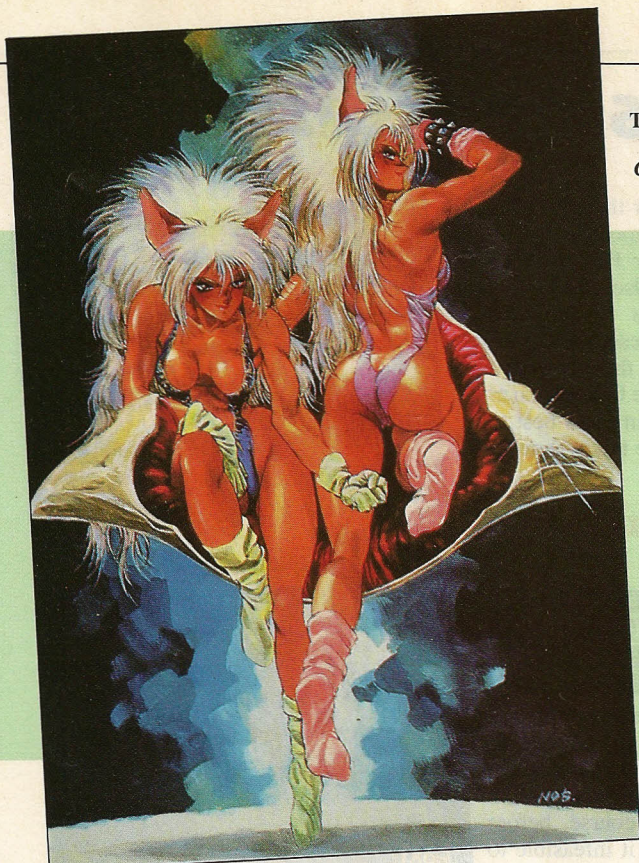
(Manga Video, £12.99, full-screen)

Lewd, crude and moderately amusing, this tale of out-of-control cops and robbers is notable for its nymphet Cat Girl villains and hokey dialogue.

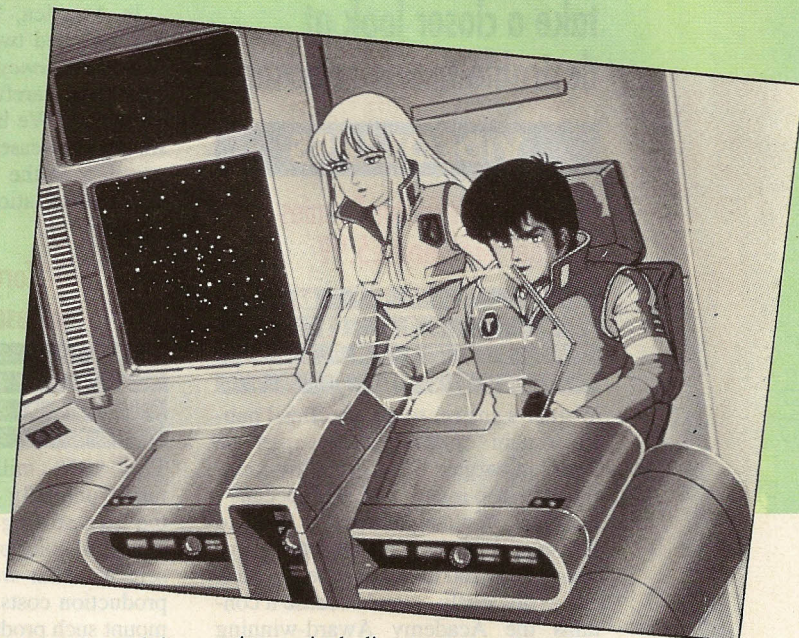
The tape has a dubbed mono



Demons unleashed in the violent Legend Of The Overfiend



The Venus Wars (far left), Tank Police villains the Cat Sisters (left) and Odin (right) typify the appeal of anime movies



is *Project A-Ko*, a fairly pointless parody of a genre which is largely parodic anyway. In this twee effort, superhuman schoolgirl A-Ko battles terrifying monsters for the friendship of her chum C-Ko.

Apart, perhaps, from *Project A-Ko*, all the titles so far are well worth investigating, particularly if animation is a serious interest. For keen

collectors, there's a manga club offering competitions, discounts and special deals.

If you're a fan of cyberpunk efforts like *Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, *Predator* and *Alien*, you can't afford to miss out on manga video. A recent season of anime at London's prestigious ICA indicates that there's plenty more good material waiting in the

wings, including some non-genre pieces such as the story of a schoolboy survivor of Hiroshima.

The latest Manga Video title to look out for is *Urotsukidoji — Legend Of The Overfiend*, a horrendously violent exercise with monstrous demons battling humans and man-beasts for control of the Land of Eternity. It's certainly not for the squeamish.

Currently available Manga videotapes

soundtrack, but reasonably good picture quality.

Dominion Tank Police — Acts 3 and 4

(Manga Video, £12.99, full-screen)

More of the same, only dafter. Still in mono sound though. The Cat Sisters save the day.

Project A-KO

(Manga Video, £12.99, widescreen)

Teen angst, manga style. Seventeen-year-old A-Ko, and her chum C-Ko, fend off the unwelcome advances of spoilt brat B-Ko, even as a monstrous alien spaceship glides towards Earth. Presented in a 16:9 ratio and benefiting from a stereo soundtrack.

Fist Of The North Star

(Manga Video, £12.99, full-screen)

Bone-crunching, blood-spurting, eye-ball popping anime action for iron stomachs only. Like *Akira*, this is a post-apocalyptic yarn

peopled by mutants, bikers and sundry oddballs.

Unlike *Akira*, the animation is relatively unsophisticated. Will Ken (Ken?), Fist Of The North Star, restore peace to the ravaged planet and rescue his fiancée Julia? Who cares? Just enjoy the chaos.

Odin

(Manga Video, £12.99, full-screen)

Odin is a mythical civilisation of great beauty. The Starlight is Earth's greatest starship. The latter is trying to find the former. An engaging space opera with a rock stereo soundtrack.

Venus Wars

(Manga Video, £12.99, widescreen)

Cracking sci-fi adventure adapted from a best-selling manga comic book which recounts the exploits of a band of biker hotshots and a girl reporter from Earth. Presented in approximately 18:9 ratio, the film features some excellent anime artwork and has a great stereo soundtrack.

Urotsukidoji — Legend Of The Overfiend

(Manga Video, £12.99, full-screen)

Horror — manga style. Demons walk the Earth, feasting on human flesh . . . and very little seems able to stop them. The artwork is stylish and spectacular; the stereo soundtrack atmospheric. The action, however, is gruesome in the extreme.

Anime UK

A 32-page fanzine dedicated to the extraordinary world of Japanimation, entitled *Anime UK*, is available priced £3.99. Editions can be obtained from Comet Miniatures, 46-48 Lavender Hill, London, SW11 5RH. Tel. 071-228 3702.

Comet also sells anime-related merchandise, such as manga-style robot kits and die-cast figures.